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ABSTRACT

Five teachers, whose experience and reputations recommended them as successful writing teachers, but who used different methods in their freshman composition course, were asked to test their classes at the beginning and end of the course on writing ability and writing anxiety. The pre- and post-testing was accomplished through a written essay, which was holistically graded by an impartial grader, and through the Thompson Attitude Scale. The instructors varied in their use of a traditional rhetorical (TR) approach, a traditional organic (TO) approach, an individualized personal interview/tutor (IPI) approach, an individualized, self-instructional unit (ISIU) approach, or a language study (LS) approach. The instructors' instructional methods were similar in many ways: for example, all assigned approximately the same amount of written work, all asked for revisions of poorer papers, and none taught grammar. However, with respect to the use of reading models, topic assignment, grading, instructional format, and focus, their approaches varied. The TR, TO, and IPI approaches produced moderate anxiety reduction and moderate writing improvement; the Language Study Approach showed statistically significant reduction in writing anxiety and a significant increase in writing ability; and the ISIU approach showed significant increases in both writing anxiety and ability. The report describes the instructional methods used by each instructor and presents results and conclusions. (AYC)

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A STUDY OF WRITING ANXIETY:

THE EFFECTS OF SEVERAL

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

by

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At the 1978 Conference on College Composition and Communication, I reported on the significant reduction of writing anxiety in a freshman composition class accompanied by significant improvement in writing through instruction with a "Language Study Approach."[1] At that time, it seemed obvious that a further rtep in testing would be to compare the several standard approaches to teaching freshman compositon for their effect on classroom writing anxiety.

It has been proposed by researchers that writing anxiety would be a collection of behaviors that encourage the student to avoid writing.[2] On that basis, reduction of student writing anxiety seems to be a plausible goal for the composition teacher. We tend to feel that if students can be helped to move readily towards their writing assignments without anxiety about the writing itself they might become better writers. But several researchers, myself among them, have pointed out that a certain amount of writing anxiety may be necessary to motivate a student to accomplish his/her best writing.[3] The study I will outline here seems to support these hypotheses.

Five teachers, whose experience and reputations recommended them as successful writing teachers, but who individually approached the freshman course from differing methods were asked to test their Fall freshman classes at the beginning and the end of the course on two measures, writing and

writing anxiety. The pre and post testing was accomplished through administering a written essay and the Thompson Attitude Scale. The essays were holistically graded by an impartial grader;[4] the attitude scales were individually scored. The scores were tabulated and the significance of differences calculated.

The five teachers who volunteered for the study taught the following:

* Traditional Rhetorical Approach
* Traditional Organic Approach
* Individualized Personal Interview/Tutor Approach
* Individualized Self-Instructional Unit Approach
* Language Study Approach

All five teachers have over ten years experience at Northern Virginia Community College. All have demonstrated ability to attract and hold students. All would be described as respected and popular, with dynamic personalities. All teachers assigned 2,000-2,500 written words per 10 week quarter, usually divided among five essays. All teachers asked for revisions of the poorer papers. None taught grammar per se, but all reviewed grammar as particular errors showed themselved in writing. All teachers made some use of individual interviews for extra student assistance, though most voiced the customary complaint that students do not make use of professors' office hours. All five teachers presented the required instruction on topics,

thesis statements, information gathering, organization and conclusion. Some of the five combined basic instruction with information ahbut the "writing process": writing is a three stage process 1) pre-writing, 2) composing, 3) revising, not a static one step activity. Otherwise, the following constituted the main differences in approaches.

The Traditional Rhetorical approach used assigned essays to read as models of rhetorical format. Writing topics were assigned by rhetorical format. Letter grades were assigned. Writing instruction was presented through formal lecture and discussion. This approach directs its attention to students learning to write by observing and imitating successful writers.

The Traditional Organic approach used very little assigned reading and that not as models of rhetorical format. Writing topics were assigned, outlining situations which dictated a sense of voice and audience, but no rhetorical format. Letter grades were assigned. Writing instruction was presented through formal lecture and discussion. Peer group work augmented instruction. This approach directs its attention to students learning to write by responding to a writing situation and discovering their own methods in the process.

The Interview/Tutor approach assigned no reading. Students selected their own topics. Rhetorical format was not assigned. Letter grades were assigned, but work was

reviewed constantly as it progressed through tutorials. Writing instruction was presented through individual interviews as the writing situation dictated. This approach directs its attention to students learning to write by responding to the personal unique quality of each written experience.

The Self-Instructional/Unit approach used assigned essays to read as models of rhetorical format. Writing topics were assigned by rhetorical format. Letter grades were assigned. Students were required to repeat assignments for a satisfactory grade. Writing instruction was presented through self-instructional units. This approach directs its attention to students learning to write by working privately with minimal direction, so as to achieve personal mastery.

The Language Study approach used assigned essays on language to read for content about the language process and for rhetorical format. Writing topics were assigned based on student experiences with language, by rhetorical mode. Letter grades were assigned, and the option for revision given. Writing instruction was presented through formal lecture, discussion, and peer group. This approach directs its attention to students learning to write by discovering the language itself, and by observing others' use of language, thereby discovering their own use of language.

Results showed improved writing ability as measured by

the holistically graded pre and post test essays among classes of all five approaches, with two approaches showing statistically significant improvement.

Four of the five approaches showed reduction in Writing Anxiety, only one statistically significant. One approach produced statistically significant increased Writing Anxiety. The most interesting results showed that only the approaches producing statistically significant changes in Writing Anxiety, either increase or decrease, produced statistically significant improved writing ability.

The two traditional approaches and the interview approach showed moderate anxiety reduction and moderate writing improvment, but the difference between means in such classes was not statistically significant. The Language Study Approach showed a statistically significant reduction in Writing Anxiety ($t=-1.68$, $df = 50$, $p < .05$) and a statistically significant improvement in writing ability ($t=1.65$, $df = 50$, $p < .05$). The Individualized Self-Instructional Unit Approach showed a statistically significant increase in Writing Anxiety ($t=1.37$, $df = 39$, $p < .10$) and a statistically significant improvement in writing ability ($t=3.30$, $df = 39$, $p < .005$).

Before forming any conclusions, I asked the teachers more specifically about their methodology. To focus on specific Writing Anxiety behaviors, I interviewed each of the five teachers, using the four part survey developed by Martin and Lynn Bloom.[5] The survey divides behaviors into

behavioral, affective, cognitive and environmental factors.

Among behavioral factors, only the Language Study teacher formally discussed the problems of procrastination or inability to concentrate, though all teachers said they would discuss such things in personal interviews. Among affective behaviors, all teachers discussed formally and individually such anxious feelings as being unable to write, being evaluated, and disliking the course. Among cognitive behaviors, all teachers gave explicit instruction on topics, thesis statements, information gathering, organization, and conclusions. Among environmental factors, most of the teachers gave "parental" talks at one time or another on the importance of having a good quiet place to write, and of avoiding distractions, but only the Language Study teacher discussed discovering a personal writing rhythm.

Because these interviews seemed not to turn up any significant differences other than approach that might cause change in Writing Anxiety, I further interviewed the instructor of the Self-Instructional Unit approach. Though she was at first disturbed that student Writing Anxiety increased, she was pleased that it was accompanied by highly significant writing improvement. She described her course as one that stresses mastery. She addresses attitudes toward writing and self-instruction in the first unit of her course.[6] Also, because the course is highly individualized, many anxieties are dealt with on a personal basis in conferences and one-

to-one classroom contact. To alleviate procrastination she checks drafts, and gives advice on topics if students ask. To increase concentration, she often has students do units in class. Instruction on topics, theses, and organization is spelled out in units, including exact behaviors expected of the student. Environmental factors are controlled somewhat because unit tests are given in the college testing laboratory, though students can work the units and do their writing at home. Ideally, this system should allow students to adjust their writing and testing to their own rhythm, if they knew what that was.

This teacher suspected that apprehension rose because of her use of mastery. Any student who doesn't earn a 70% or a C- on an assignment must rewrite, or retake the test, as many times as necessary until s/he passes the unit. This frustrates students, but most also realize it "makes" them learn. And the study results seem to endorse this supposition.

The Language Study approach was taught by this writer. Because I have worked with techniques to alleviate Writing Anxiety and have tested the Language Study approach before, I was not surprised by the results of the study regarding the effects of the approach. These results verified those of previous research. The Language Study approach de-mythologizes the language and writing process. Model essays which include content about how language works trigger discussion of the writer's dilemma. Such readings help

students recognize that their writing problems aren't unique. Classroom discussion of the reality of language and writing, of sign, symbol, and meaning, of dialect, connotations and metaphor, help students discover that their perceived difficulties are part of a writer's work.

This study supports previous research in several areas. First, student writing will improve under the tutelage of good writing teachers regardless of the approach used. Second, a Self-Instructional Unit approach significantly improves writing ability.[7] Third, anxiety about writing seems to affect writing ability. Fourth, a Language Study approach significantly reduces Writing Anxiety while significantly improving writing ability.

In addition, this study introduces the possibility that writing anxiety may be significantly affected by the approach used to teach writing, which in turn may significantly affect improvement in writing ability. More interesting are the results that show a significant increase in Writing Anxiety can accompany a significant improvement in writing ability.

Our shared experiences as teachers have told us that students who freeze with an "I can't do it!" stance will probably not do well in a writing class. And we are aware that students who write with an "I don't care!" stance will similarly not do well in a writing class. This study indicates that attention paid to Writing Anxiety in the classroom may affect the degree of writing improvement in the classroom.

ENDNOTES

[1]Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "The Development and Evaluation of A Language Study Approach to a College Course in Freshman Composition" (Ph.D. dissertation, "The American University, 1978).

[2]Lynn Z. Bloom and Martin Bloom, "An Empirical Study of Writing Anxiety: Its Manifestations and Reduction," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Denver, 1978.

[3]Several researchers have proposed this idea, among them Thompson, 1978; L. and M. Bloom, 1978; and John Daly, 1975.

[4]Many studies have shown that holistic grading is reliable. See Cast (1939), Coward (1952), Nisbet (1955), Ravan (1973), and McColly (1970), in bibliography of Thompson, 1978.

[5]Bloom, 1978.

[6]Brian Hansen and Judy Riggin, "An Evaluation of Self-Instructional English" (Brief, Office of Institutional Research, Northern Virginia Community College, 1976).

[7]Brian Hansen and Judy Riggin, Anyone Can Write (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Company, 1979).

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